DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 476 160 SP 041 507

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TITLE	Unbraiding the Rhetoric about Student Achievement and Teacher Quality in Georgia.
PUB DATE	2003-03-00
NOTE	25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Georgia Association of Teacher Educators (St. Simons Island, GA, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; Black Students; Elementary Education; *Family Influence; Grade 4; Grade 6; *Grade Repetition; Low Achievement; One Parent Family; Poverty; *Racial Discrimination; Racial Segregation; *Socioeconomic Influences; Socioeconomic Status; *Standardized Tests; State Standards; Teacher Competencies
IDENTIFIERS	*Georgia

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed data from statewide criterion referenced competency tests (CRCTs), used to determine whether a child is retained in grade, investigating whether trends and differences in scores across Georgia for students from similar family backgrounds could be linked to failing this test twice in elementary school. The study explored whether there would be discernible differences in student achievement if children were highly segregated by race, also noting the impact of parents' education, income, poverty, and unwed mother status. Researchers compared data on students' achievement scores in reading, language arts, and mathematics from the 1999-00 fourth grade CRCT with data from the 2001-02 sixth grade CRCT taken by the same cohort groups. Results indicated that many of the same students failed the CRCT in fourth and sixth grade, and as family income went up, failure went down. The socioeconomic correlation to test scores suggests that many poor children, largely African Americans who live in households with unwed mothers, are the ones most at risk for failing twice in elementary school. Results from other research suggest that offering students small classes with smarter teachers who have high levels of motivation and talent have large effects on student achievement. (Contains 36 references.) (SM)

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ED 476 160

Unbraiding the Rhetoric About Student Achievement and Teacher Quality in Georgia

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A Paper Presented at the Georgia Association of Teacher Educators Spring Conference
2003

Sea Palms Resort
St. Simons Island, Georgia
March 6, 2003

SP041507

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Abstract

The focus of this analysis is a quasi-longitudinal study of statewide criterion referenced competency tests used to determine if a child is retained in grade to determine whether trends and differences in scores across the state for students from similar family backgrounds can be linked to failing this test twice in elementary school. Specifically, we address the question if children are highly segregated by race, will there be discernable differences in student achievement? Following this thread, we explore parents' education, income, poverty and unwed mothers as characteristics that may play a role in academic failure.

Unbraiding the Rhetoric About Student Achievement and Teacher Quality in Georgia

Political pundits rarely reach a consensus in Georgia, but when the gubernatorial election of 2002 is mentioned in the peach state there is widespread agreement that those who voted did so to defeat incumbent Governor Roy Barnes for two reasons: (1) A new state flag sans stars and bars as the dominant symbol, and (2) Teachers overwhelmingly voted against Barnes because of the school reforms that were initiated at his behest (Edwards, Tomlin, Lombino, & Williams, 2002). Because our focus is on the educational arena and not what flag best represents Georgia, we will limit our discussion to why teachers took a stand against many of the recent reforms and, now that the reform movement is being unbraided by the new administration, what will work to improve student achievement in Georgia.

Although Former Governor Barnes was, for most part, in lock step with President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed on January 8, 2002, teachers have, nonetheless, become frustrated with curricular mandates that pegged their effectiveness as teaching professionals to the results of a statewide standardized achievement test (No Child Left Behind, 2002). What's more is that these same tests are now legislated to be the arbiter for student promotion to the fourth, sixth and ninth grades (Georgia State Board of Education, 2001). As frustrating as school reform in Georgia has been over the past years, the de-reform agendas that may be put into motion for the legislature to consider are as troubling as the reforms that were previously initiated. Mired in an economic downturn, there is a dangerous perspective brewing that any school

reform is too expensive for Georgia at this time. As a way to provide some background on the effectiveness of the past reforms, we begin our discussion with an analysis of student achievement during the time of reform from academic year 1999 - 2000 to academic year 2001- 2002 followed by recommendations for policy that will result in the desired improvement in student achievement.

One Size Fits All Reform Fails Twice

Intended to improve academic achievement, Georgia began, during the 1999-2000 academic year to initiate educational reforms designed to increase the amount of academic content that elementary children must know and to assess this new baseline of student achievement with a statewide criterion based test called the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT). It was the state policy makers' thinking that to ensure that every child in Georgia is taught the same content and process skills, the state's standardized curriculum, named the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC), ought to be directly aligned with the CRCT. Because the CRCT is aligned with the curriculum, the state reasons that the CRCT is a valid test that meets accepted standards because it tests what is being taught (Deskbook Encyclopedia of American School Law, 2002).

In the quest to improve academic achievement, reforms have also been designed to respond to the public and political call for educational accountability. Proclaiming that getting tough on students will improve the quality of education, Georgia decided in 2001 to end the practice of social promotion (Eisner, 2000; Barnes, 2001). Beginning in 2004, Georgia's legislature mandated that the fourth and sixth grade, as well as the eighth grade in middle school, would be gateway grades, meaning that passing these particular CRCT

tests would be required for promotion to the next grade level (Georgia State Board of Education, 2001). By making the CRCT a high stakes assessment that ends the practice of social promotion and by aligning the test with the QCCs, reformers are assuming that teachers will have more incentive to teach what the state deems to be essential knowledge. As a way to guarantee teacher compliance, CRCT scores will also be used as the measure that, in large part, evaluates teaching competency. To guarantee administrator compliance, each school's CRCT scores will be made public in the form of an annual performance "report card" (Georgia Department of Education, 2003). Demonstrating their support for these reforms, many school principals across the state have initiated CRCT pep rallies, an indication that many are going to the extreme to pass the CRCT. Some districts have convened their top teachers and administrators to contemplate the most essential of the essential QCCs, in an attempt to determine what will most likely be on the test. One district in Western Georgia commissioned one hundred and twenty five of its teachers to identify these essential QCCs, and to post this information with a capital "E" on the district's website (Troup County School District, 2002). An example of one QCC that this district designated with a capital "E" as essential for third grade social studies is "proper flag care," giving pause as to what exactly is essential knowledge and who is the best judge of that concept (Troup County School District, 2002). Endorsing the practice of teaching to the test, Georgia's Department of Education has created a website called the Georgia Learning Connection, a site that provides QCC aligned lesson plans available for teachers to download on the Georgia department of Education's Georgia Learning Connection website (Georgia Department of Education, 2002). As a resource for novice teachers, the Georgia Department of

Education has prepared instructional plans that span the entire school year, from day one to day one hundred and eighty.

Despite these sweeping reforms to the State's education system, along with all the attempts to prepare children for the test, achievement scores have improved little for the first group of fourth graders who took the inaugural CRCT in 1999-2000, and have actually declined in many school districts. What follows is an analysis that compares achievement scores in reading, language arts and mathematics on the 1999-2000 fourth grade CRCT with the 2001-2002 sixth grade CRCT taken by this same cohort group.

Treading Water

The focus of this analysis is the comparison of the 1999-2000 fourth grade CRCT scores in reading, language arts and mathematics with the 2001-2002 CRCT scores of the same cohort two years later to determine whether trends and differences in scores across the state for students from similar family backgrounds can be linked to failing the CRCT twice in elementary school.

It is not our intent to privilege academic achievement as the only purpose for schools, nor do we feel that standardized tests paint a complete picture of achievement. Because there is a limit to how many test questions can be included on the test, the CRCT can only assess a limited amount of knowledge, and by their very nature, achievement tests tend to emphasis basic skills rather than critical thinking (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 1998). Although using standardized test scores to measure student achievement surely has its limitations, standardized achievement tests, such as the CRCT, are useful because every child in the state has taken the same examination making

the scores comparable to one another. As suggested by Greenwald, Hedges and Laine (1996), we have used county school district level data (State of Georgia Office of Educational Assessment, 2002; Georgia Department of Education, 2002), socioeconomic data at the county level (University of Georgia, Department of Housing and Consumer Economics, 2002) and the analysis is quasi-longitudinal. Unavoidably, the quasi-longitudinal character of this analysis is a limitation to this study because we cannot conclude that a particular child has failed the CRCT twice by looking at the aggregated data. Although a quasi-longitudinal study of this kind is a proxy, we believe that the analysis illustrates the relationships between the variables. This kind of research is, of course, legitimate because it illuminates broad possibilities that may lead to further research at the individual elementary school level (Darling-Hammond, 2002).

Suggesting relationships through the use of correlational statistics between CRCT test scores and socioeconomic data also has its limitations. But here again, correlational studies are legitimate because they act as "rough indicators of possible relationships that then require further examination" (Darling-Hammond, 2002, p. 37). Specifically, we address the question if children are highly segregated by race, will there be discernable differences in student achievement (Kain, 1996)? Following this thread, we explore parents' education, income, poverty and unwed mothers as characteristics that may play a role in academic failure (Phillips, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Crane, 1998). In this light, we believe our analysis adds to the work of Phillips et al. (1998) who found that home and community effects explain most academic failure and Ferguson's (1991) assertion that the relationship between poverty and female-headed households is a statistically significant predictor of test scores.

Reading Scores

Statewide, thirty seven percent of the fourth graders in 1999-2000 failed the reading component of the CRCT. Two years later in the sixth grade, twenty three percent failed the CRCT reading component in 2001-2002. Looking at this improvement as cause for celebration is misguided once the data is inspected at the district level to reveal who are the winners and who are the losers. When the CRCT becomes the only arbiter for promotion, only four counties would be able to promote more than 90% of its students. African American children trailed the state average in 122 of the 159 county school districts analyzed. In the 140 counties in which African Americans reside in the state, African American children in 120 of these counties fell farther behind white children over the three years.

Out of the 158 county districts analyzed, nineteen are all white school districts. Reading scores in these school districts ranged from eight to twenty six failing the reading component with an improvement over fourth grade scores of 8% to 125%. As for the twelve predominately black districts in the state, the failure rate ranged from 20% to 80% with a minus 11% to a positive 135% improvement over fourth grade reading scores.

At the extremes, the best performing county was affluent suburban Fayette County School District with 7% of its whites failing and 16% of its African American children failing. Trailing the field is poor, rural Taliaferro County with 71% of whites failing and 80% African Americans not making the grade.

When socioeconomic data was paired with test scores, the primary determinates appear to be unwed mothers (r= .66 p>.000) and children in poverty (r= .67 p>.000). Table 1 shows that these two determinates are much stronger than educational attainment and household income.

Table 1. Correlation between Sixth Grade CRCT Reading Failure

Unwed Mothers	.66
Children In Poverty	.64
No High School Degree	.41
Income	-.34

While confirming Ferguson's research (1991), it is particularly interesting to discuss these findings in light of Phillips, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov and Crane's (1998) assertion that income alone does not seem to be strongly related to children's test scores. Although, the moderate negative correlation in this study does suggest that when income goes up, failure comes down, its important to look holistically at a broad measure of factors to begin to explain how family characteristics effect student achievement (Phillips et al., 1998).

Language Arts Scores

When the fourth grade scores were compared to the sixth grade scores, this cohort of elementary school children, 133 out of 158 school districts, lost ground on the language arts component of the CRCT. Twenty seven county schools, mostly in rural declining areas, often referred to as the Black Belt of Georgia, would be forced to fail

50% or more of its students because they did not exceed the cut score on the sixth grade language arts CRCT.

Even the all white counties did not escape the language arts CRCT unscathed. Only two of the nineteen counties improved over the three years of testing with a range from 15% to 42 % failing this part of the CRCT. Only one of the twelve-predominately African American schools made any improvement, failing a staggering 47% to 83% of their children. In a state where 142 of its 158 counties have over fifty percent of their African American children born to an unwed mother, it is not surprising that 75 counties will fail half of their African American children if the language arts CRCT was used in academic year 2001 to decide grade level promotion.

Similar to correlates in reading, Table 2 shows that unwed mothers ($r=.62$ $p>.000$) and children in poverty characteristics were higher than educational attainment as measured by a high school degree ($r=.49$ $p< .000$) and income ($r=-.39$ $p<.000$). Our range of socioeconomic correlations is consistent with Rowan, Chiang, and Miller (1997) who reported a moderate (.41) correlation between the students SES and achievement ($r= .41$, $p < .000$).

Table 2. Correlation Between Sixth Grade Language Arts CRCT Scores

Unwed Mothers	.62
Children In Poverty	.67
No High School Degree	.49
Income	-.39

Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine (1996) also cite student poverty and unwed mothers as the two most important variables for determining student achievement, with children in poverty being the single most important. Explaining how these two variables work in tandem to undermine student achievement, Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine (1996) describe a scenario where social capital, the amount of educative time mothers have to devote to helping their children with homework or engaging in activities that enhance learning, is in short. With welfare reform in place, more poor mothers are now working long hours at low wages. Work outside the home decreases the time that a mother can spend with her children, thus the amount of social capital that can be spent on educative activities is decreased (Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996).

To get a picture of what a dearth of social capital might look like, Warren County, Georgia has a per capita income of $17,600, forty percent of the children are living in rural poverty with seventy percent of their mothers unwed; the poverty figure rises to ninety two percent for the African American population. When our Warren County School District cohort group sat for the forth grade language arts component of the CRCT in back in 1999-2000, forty-eight percent failed. Three years later, they are doing thirteen percent worse evidenced by fifty-five percent of their children failing the sixth grade language arts component in 2001-2002.

Mathematics Scores

A similar story unfolds when we analyzed the mathematics components of the 1999-2000 and 2001-2002 CRCT. Although our results show that gains are occurring in math scores across the state, from 41% failing in 1999 –2000 to 35% failing in 2001-

2002, the improvement is less than one standard deviation unit (sd=.11). Of the 159 counties analyzed, fifty counties did not improve or lost ground, twenty-six counties show African American test scores in retrograde and fifteen of the poorest counties in the state would fail 50 % or more of their children. From our analysis of segregated schools, an average 29% percent of the white students failed compared to a mean 55% of those who attended predominately African American schools.

As Table 3 shows, the relationships between socioeconomic variables are less than reading and language arts test scores in all four correlations. This decrease suggests school inputs may be most effective in improving mathematics test scores.

Table 3. Correlation Between Sixth Grade Mathematics CRCT Scores

Unwed Mothers	.57
Children In Poverty	.58
No High School Degree	.39
Income	-.34

Positive relationships between teacher preparation and pupil performance have been noted on the secondary level (Monk, D.1994) and Ferguson (1991) found that smaller schools and low teacher to pupil ratios contributed to an increase in mathematics scores. Because they believe that there are no experiments to date that can significantly measure the effects of teacher characteristics on student achievement, Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, and Williamson (1998) discount research that supports increased investments in teachers. Instead, they attribute gains in math scores to ongoing structural reform within public education.

Effects of Failed Twice in Elementary School

Although it is only suggestive that many of the same children who failed the fourth grade CRCT have also failed the sixth grade CRCT in one or more content areas, we believe that the socioeconomic correlation to test scores suggest that many poor children, largely African American who live in a household with an unwed mother, are the ones most at risk for failing twice in elementary school.

For many, it's just common sense to fail a child who does not pass the academic requirements for promotion to the next grade, but repeating a grade is a highly visible act, one that separates a student from his age peers. A preponderance of research shows that the single most important determinate for dropping out of school is being overage for one's grade (Ellwein & Glass, 1989; Foster, 1993; Frymier, 1997). It is also well documented that students who are held back do worse in the long run compared to students who are promoted, in part because they give up on themselves as learners (Denton, 2001). Rather than accepting failure, children perceive the decision to repeat a grade as a punishment for something out of their control, a perception that discourages them from completing school (Foster, 1993). Dropping out of school is not the only deleterious effect of retention, students who fail a grade have many more problems, in every risk area, including substance abuse and teen pregnancy, than those students who were promoted to stay with their peers (Denton, 2001; Frymier, 1997; Owings & Magliaro, 1998). Failing such a large percentage of children twice in elementary school will surely contribute to the ever widening socio-economic divide between Whites and African Americans in Georgia because African American children will be systematically

encouraged to throw in the towel on their education by deciding to drop out of school, resulting in the inability to command wages that might lift them out of poverty (Livingston & Livingston, 2002).

Why One Size Fits All Reforms Don't Work

Although there are policy makers who believe that failing anywhere from one quarter to three quarters of children twice in elementary schools is a necessary wake up call for teachers and students to improve achievement (Barnes, 2001), those closer to the day to day workings of the school house cannot fathom how such punishments inflicted on poor children across most of the rural parts of the state will improve their reading, writing and arithmetic. Some say what is need is more investments into the institution of education's traditional school inputs such as teachers, class size and smaller schools. On the other side are those who want to dismantle the present system through free market style changes such as reconceptualizing teacher certification and hiring along with school vouchers. Because who has the money matters, the ongoing debate about educational policy toward the concept called "student achievement" is bogged down a binary argument that rests on oppositional politics originating at the state level and above.

Accretive to the Coleman (1966) report that found characteristics of students' home backgrounds to be major determinates of the students' achievement and that school funding has little affect on achievement, Goldhaber and Brewer (1998) have suggested that individual traits and family background explain the vast majority of variation in student test scores, up to seventy-five percent in certain situations. Hanushek (1986) and Coleman, Campbell, Wood, Weinfeld, and York (1966) supports this view as well with

studies that show that school inputs have very little effect on student performance on standardized tests.

Yet, challenging the claims that more money will not raise student achievement scores, is convincing research to the contrary that suggests that while family variables explain most of the variance in achievement scores, there is evidence that spending more money does matter (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Ferguson & Ladd, 1996; Ferguson, 1991). Although agreeing that student poverty is the primary determinate that affects student achievement, research done by Hedges, Laine and Greenwald (1996) as well as the work of Ferguson and Ladd (1996) illuminate the point that investment in certain school inputs will result in an increase in student achievement large enough to make the case that spending more money does matter.

Berliner and Biddle have pointed out that Coleman recanted on his work after the 1966 report that argued that there are determinates other than socioeconomic variables that effect student performance. From their viewpoint, as well as from ours, "the Coleman Report was right when it alerted Americans to the effects of home background on student achievement, but it was wrong when it concluded that school characteristics and funding have no effects on student achievement" (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 78). Because there is credible evidence that confirms that, across the board, higher levels of school funding are associated with academic achievement, our recommendations specifically spotlight how investments in changing the teaching environment will bring about increases in student achievement. Time has come for policy makers to stop the rhetorical riddles about raising student achievement with inexpensive solutions such as

tests and school report cards and begin to think seriously about the state of teaching in Georgia (Darling-Hammond, 1999).

Doing What Works: small classes with more satisfied and smarter teachers.

Borne out by our analysis and supporting research, there seems to be little doubt overriding predictor for student achievement is socioeconomic characteristics. With up to seventy percent correlations in some areas, it is apparent that schools, in their present capacity, can only do so much to improve economic and cultural conditions in the community. Yet, this is not to say that schools are entirely ineffective. There is somewhat of a consensus in the literature about what works to improve student achievement. First, the total amount of aggregate funding a school receives has a significant relationship to student achievement (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Second, as class size comes down, scores go up (Ferguson, 1991). Third, teachers with high general cognitive ability produce higher test scores (Ehrenberg & Brewer, 1994).

When it comes to allocation of money dispensed per full time equivalent student (FTE), Georgia, to its credit, uses a sliding scale in an attempt to level the playing field between richer and poorer counties. For example, very poor rural Quitman County contributes 27% toward the total FTE from local revenue whereas, another better off rural county such as Morgan contributes 40% in the form of local revenues (Georgia Department of Education, 2002). Quitman also gets a bigger state contribution than does Morgan to achieve certain statewide reform objectives such as class size reduction. Thus, the problem is not a "Savage Inequality" one, as described in Jonathan Kozal's (1991) landmark book, that indicts the unequal distribution of resources as the reason for poor

results. And, it is not because the policymakers under Governor Barnes were not implementing research-based reforms that research has suggested as being effective to increase student performance. One such commendable effort was the push to reduce class size. Because smaller class size has been shown to improve academic achievement, there was a prevailing consensus in Georgia educational policy and funding to accept the research that found that class size matters (Ferguson & Ladd, 1996). Now that the new gubernatorial administration of Sonny Perdue is in place in Atlanta, there is a movement to take a "go slow" approach to class size reduction citing the teacher shortage crisis concomitant with the budgetary money as the reason for a realistic timetable to achieve the goal. Governor Perdue proposed to the legislature in February of 2003 that class size should be allowed to increase by two students for academic year 2003-2004, reductions would resume in subsequent years (Georgia Association of Educators, 2003). While there may be a budget shortfall, is there really a teacher shortage?

Data acquired from the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) and the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GAPSC) paint a much different picture (NCTAF, 2003; GAPSC, 2002). Aside from mathematics and science teachers, there is no shortage of teachers (NCTAF, 2003). This is not to say that there is not crisis, there is one. But, its not about recruitment, its about stemming the tide of teachers who leave the profession within the first five years of teaching. Consistent with The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003) statistics that show that one third of teachers leave the profession with three years and one half quit within five years, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (2002) says that 36.6% leave with the first three years and an additional 19.7% leave before five years for a total

attrition rate of 56% in just five years. Out of the 13,084 new teachers hired in FY 2002, 8,303 were teachers who replaced those who quit. Only 4,781 were hired due to population growth or because of class size reduction mandates (GPSC, 2002). If policy shifted toward reducing teacher attrition by 50% in the first five years, class size reduction as well as building a more experienced faculty could be achieved simultaneously. Who are those who are most likely to leave the profession? Those with teaching certificates from college prepared programs that exited the workforce represent a small number of the total, it is those who are teaching with some sort of alternative certificate who leave the profession more than twice as often, 35.8% as compared to 15.9% (GPSC, 2002).

The research of Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine (1996), Walsh (2001), Goldhaber and Brewer (1998), and Ehrenberg and Brewer (1994) suggests that the most important influence, aside from socio-economic determinates, for student achievement is the teachers' general cognitive ability. Ehrenberg and Brewer (1994) suggest that a quantitatively significant strategy to ascertain a teacher's general cognitive ability is to look at the selectivity of the teacher's college alma mater. Ehrenberg and Brewer's (1994) study "found that the average "selectivity" of the undergraduate institutions that teachers in a school graduated from has an important influence both on students' gain scores and their base year test scores" (p. 14).

As Darling-Hammond (1999) wryly points out, "In a logical world, one would expect that policy makers unhappy with the outcomes of their policies would make serious attempts to revise what they are doing in ways that change the outcomes they deplore" (p. 146). Although it remains to be seen how serious policy makers are about

fixing Georgia's problems, there is convincing research that can show them the way. Simply put, small classes with smarter school teachers who have high levels of motivation and talent appear to have the biggest effects on students' achievement. Clearly, attention to recruiting and retaining these types of teachers in schools with small classes ought to be the priority for educational policy makers (Rowan, Chiang, & Miller, 1997).

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Author(s): Livingston, Donald R. & Livingston, Sharon M.

Corporate Source: Paper presented at Georgia Association of Colleges for Teacher Education Spring 03 Conference, (March 5-7) 2003, St Simons Island GA

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